

White Paper

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White Paper

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Humanities Collections and Reference Resources Foundations Grant White Paper

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Grant Title: Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO) to the 21st Century Collaborative Planning Project

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Introduction

Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO) is a consortial program that facilitates access historical documents, personal papers, family histories, and more from [member](#) archives, libraries, and museums across Texas to inform, enrich, and empower researchers all over the world.

The primary service currently provided by TARO is making finding aids in the EAD XML format available online in HTML; providing database administration; and facilitating the discovery of finding aid search and retrieval.

In 2014 the University of Texas at Austin Libraries received notice that they had received their Humanities Collections and Reference Resources Foundations Grant for the Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO) to the 21st Century Collaborative Planning Project.

This one-year planning project would focus on four goals. To create:

1. A written plan that provides concrete actions for achieving targeted improvements to TARO, including a highly detailed project narrative, with a work plan, staffing and budget requirements. This plan will be used by TARO and UT Libraries to seek implementation funding
2. A new set of policy documents to solidify TARO's infrastructure and carry the consortium into the future. These include: a formal system of governance with written bylaws; an updated strategic plan and mission statement; a collections development policy, including a clear process for joining TARO; and TARO EAD Best Practices
3. A clear vision for what sustainability means for TARO members
4. A white paper detailing findings of planning activities, user studies and lessons learned

The TARO Steering Committee acts as the governing body with a series of working groups created to focus on specific tasks (Technology-Website, Maintenance, Governance, Funding and Sustainability, Standards, and Outreach and education). Chairs of the working groups also serve on the Steering

Committee and report group progress. The Steering Committee held monthly telephone meetings, throughout the grant period, with two face to face planning meetings held in Austin.

More frequent communication occurred with subcommittee meetings, with meeting minutes posted on the wiki and work taking place on Google docs and through email groups.

The initial plan for the project manager was envisioned as a part-time employee on site at the University of Texas over the course of one year. The consultant who had been identified at the time the grant was submitted, Danielle Plumer, was later hired by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission and was no longer available to do the work at the time the grant was awarded. After discussions with and recommendations from Ms. Plumer and a number of other EAD experts in the field interviews were held at the Society of American Archivist Conference in Cleveland. Two candidates were considered for the position of project manager and proposals were reviewed.

The Steering Committee selected Leigh A. Grinstead, as project manager and she subsequently sub-contracted with Jodi Allison-Bunnell both of whom worked on the project remotely from Colorado and Montana respectively.

Planning Outcomes

The activities undertaken during the planning grant have built a foundation for TARO's future by developing infrastructure pieces for TARO and outlining the next steps for funding changes to the site with an implementation budget and workplan. Planning has considered both short-term goals for the end of the planning grant term to keep the initiative moving forward, as well as activities that will be accomplished with implementation funding over the longer term. Outcomes of the planning grant have been very successful, with grant participants creating numerous products during the grant term in addition to the draft workplan and corresponding budget for the implementation phase. These products include high level requirements for TARO's web site; functional requirements for implementation; planning for repository training; a governance plan; collection development documentation; and a grants calendar for implementation phase funding. These concrete outcomes are the result of our planning process, which was key for confidently arriving at consensus.

Evaluation of Committee Work

Throughout the grant term, the work of subcommittees underwent continual informal evaluations to ensure the effectiveness of groups' work. At the conclusion of the grant term, subcommittee chairs compiled their experiences and submitted them to the project managers.

The majority of the work by **Education and Outreach Subcommittee** has been evaluated by the TARO steering committee during meetings and additional phone calls. The communication efforts in keeping the TARO repositories up to date on the planning grant activities and aware of ways their feedback can be contributed were well received.

Even so, the committee learned it is still possible to miss repository representatives when communicating via the TARO email list, through blogging and the SSA newsletter. As the committee works with each repository in 2016 for schema conversion, we believe we will uncover the remaining repositories who might have had staff changes which resulted in a TARO communications gap.

The schema conversion portion of work, (going beyond the actual planning of the conversion which was all that was required by the grant,) has been very well received by TARO participants. Despite the anxiety the work can cause, participants recognize that the process represents real progress in moving forward to a more modern TARO platform. While the researching of training needs and the planning for a future education program were very fruitful and met the goals of the grant, those tasks rather painfully reminded all participants of the very immediate need for this kind of ongoing training.

Education and Outreach Committee also collaborated with Rice University's User Experience Office to conduct a small scale usability study of the test platforms with researchers. This study included a scripted set of tasks given the test platforms, and afterwards a discussion and review of examples of more customized implementations of the platforms, which revealed an overall preference for XTF.

One the key issues the **Web & Technology Subcommittee** addressed was how volunteer evaluators struggled getting through each platform evaluation. Because platform evaluations were remote, written instructions were provided for volunteer evaluators both via email and included in evaluation packets that each volunteer received at the beginning of each of the three test instances.

There was persistent confusion regarding the user personas that accompanied the core evaluation tasks as well as misunderstanding about the usefulness of completing the functional requirements matrix. User personas were helpful to some in providing a context from which they could more easily respond to tasks that were outside of their normal professional duties in the archive. However, the fact that the volunteers were asked to complete tasks that they would not typically be responsible for in the course of their work day, or in their current job responsibilities, challenged both their confidence in their ability to respond to those particular questions, and well as the overall usefulness or value of the results/recommendations derived from responses they produced.

The committee responded to these challenges both by more explicitly articulating the usefulness of the personas as a method of narrowing the focus and by providing criteria for judging the ease or difficulty of completing the tasks using any of the three platforms. Web & Technology also adopted a mantra that we hoped would encourage our volunteers to ground themselves in their own experience and to help them draw insights from the evaluation experience—they are the experts!

Volunteers responded well to committee encouragement and the clarification of instructions surrounding both the personas as well as the functional requirements matrix.

As it became clear that XTF would be the recommended platform for TARO, a more focused landscape review of XTF projects was conducted. The intent of this review was to look at governance structure as well as program implementation and ongoing functionality. Governance subcommittee collaborated with

the Steering Committee co-chairs to contact the Chicago Collections project, which similar to the vision for TARO's future in that it is multi-repository and includes finding aids as well as digital objects, but is more modestly funded than the larger California Digital Library project. Chicago Collections includes a board with access to funding, paid staff for maintenance and development. Annual operating costs are covered by a modest subscription model for participating repositories plus funding from foundations. In addition to using XTF as the basic platform, Chicago Collections developed and uses the Metadata Hopper tool to address the complex issues of subject heading metadata. As TARO continues to consider how best to approach its own subject heading inconsistency issues, the possibility of using the Metadata Hopper to create a layer of project-level broad subject search categories is an exciting development.

The **Standards Subcommittee's** key evaluation of work was through survey responses and UT-AAA staff line-by-line comments of the Best Practices Guidelines document.

The Standards Committee was initially not familiar with how TARO's stylesheet has had to be revised over the years to take into account a lack of compliance with the previous encoding guidelines. TARO's technical staff person, Minnie Rangel, has told us about some aspects of her workarounds for this situation. Going forward with Schema, it will be vital that she communicate to Standards how well the new guidelines are being followed and what errors are occurring, so that proactive measures can be taken to educate repositories on the need to comply.

Comments on the Best Practices document brought to light differences in perception of what scope of detail the guidelines should address, what subjects should be outside that scope, and what level of expertise should be expected of those using the guidelines. The group realized that the document combines best practices with workflow instructions for uploading files to TARO; in the interest of having a single document cover file creation and contribution, the Steering Committee asked the group to include upload instructions. As TARO continues improvements to the information it provides through its website, the subcommittee may reconsider where uploading instructions best belong. The guidelines are not meant to advise repositories on the correct textual content for elements; each repository is encouraged to have its own manual to provide continuity for description within elements and to adhere to the EAD Tag Library in connection with DACS.

Guidelines were divided into sections, each to be worked on by a Standards member. This working plan led to a document written in several different voices by people with varying levels of expertise and familiarity with EAD and the Schema standard, which was pointed out by those reviewing and commenting on the document. Dividing the work in any other way seemed unworkable. However, a thorough revision process has served to smooth out these variations in style and voice.

One especially helpful survey response (actually submitted as two survey responses) provided line-by-line suggestions for changes, many of which were adopted. The UT-AAA staff comments were extremely helpful as a close critique and resulted in the bulk of our revisions. We were gratified that these commenters involved themselves so deeply with the document. Other responses were brief and either complementary or expressed a concern that we have taken into consideration.

Survey Regarding the Planning Process

At the end of the grant cycle Jodi Allison-Bunnell was asked to engage the Steering Committee and Subcommittees in order to determine if there were lessons to be learned that could inform future work. The group hoped that this survey would enhance overall grant evaluation and inform reporting for the NEH final report and the development of TARO's white paper for the committee at large.

The survey was created in Google Forms and sent to all Steering Committee members. In addition, one member from each subcommittee was identified by their chair as involved and knowledgeable and the survey was sent to them directly. Each respondent was asked to identify themselves by name and role, with a promise that names would be held confidential in this final report.

The survey asked users to describe in narrative form what they believed had gone well, and what should be carried on in implementation; what hadn't gone well and should be avoided in implementation; and provided a space for additional comments and an opportunity sign up for a half-hour phone interview to clarify any answers or have additional discussion.

There were eight responses out of a total of fifteen possible people. Five were Steering Committee members; the other three were members of subcommittees. Only one person signed up for a follow-up interview, and then only to clarify answers. That individual's written answers were sufficient, so there was no interview scheduled.

Lessons Learned: What's Gone Well

One clear thread throughout the feedback was how much the planning grant has helped all the individuals involved learn to work together. While there's clear appreciation for the leadership of the co-chairs and the Project Manager, there's also a strong notion of how much everyone has contributed and how important that distributed investment is to the continued success of TARO.

There is a strong belief that the development of leadership skills is important not only to the project, but to all the organizations involved. And, the subcommittee structure and relationship with the Steering Committee appears to be a comfortable one for all concerned.

Individuals also expressed great admiration for specific work products, including platform evaluation, standards revision, and schema compliance. There was recognition that certain individuals have done so much to bring these products to fruition and there were strong observations that it was a combination of both personal work ethic and great group leadership.

The importance of regular meetings and clear documentation practices was another theme in the comments. Both helped keep everyone informed, clear, and moving along to accomplish stated goals. The

overall transparency of the project was a clear area for continuity. And individuals felt that in-person meetings continue to be important.

As a whole, the group felt that the mid-project meeting in January was very valuable for clarifying the mission, vision, and audience. That work also resulted in some course corrections mid-project that also created some concerns.

Lessons Learned: What's Not Gone Well

The mid-project adjustment in focus on mission, vision, audience and the importance of finding an institutional home was the topic most mentioned in this section in detail. The perceived dissolution of the Governance subcommittee was a source of confusion and consternation.

“At the very end, it seemed that everyone decided everything was not working, and started to panic. All of a sudden, it was decided the governance committee was not needed anymore, that the steering committee could handle those things, and I'm still not sure why. The official explanation was that TARO needed to know what host institution they would be with for the future, and it would be pointless to set a lot of governance structure(s) in place without knowing the rules of a potential new host institution. However, this does not make a lot of sense to me. Is TARO looking for a new home? Because they have a home right now. Why not set up the governance structure, see if it works, and govern TARO by that while looking for a new home, if that is what is wanted? I don't understand why the entire governance structure should grind to a halt because TARO does not have a home, when they do in fact have a home. A governance structure is critical, and would have to be in place anyway for TARO to be a 501c3 or whatever type of institution they are.”

Interestingly, at the January meeting it became apparent that the Governance subcommittee was working toward developing bylaws and structures that would be helpful were the organization going to file as an independent 501c3. But that was not a direction that the Steering Committee was committed to, or, even actively discussing. There seemed to be a disconnect between the work of the two and perhaps even in this quote above different definitions of what “governance” means.

Rather than “grinding to a halt” committee members were re-deployed and asked to engage the larger committee to survey all participating institutions on a number of the grant products, evaluating their effectiveness and getting feedback from the larger community to truly gain community buy-in. The lesson here though is that that shift in message was not clearly articulated and should have been shared earlier, and/or in more ways and more often. Perhaps one on one with subcommittee members to alleviate their concerns.

A resource that may be of interest for the group to review at some point may be: Nonprofit growing pains: <http://socialimpactarchitects.com/wp/nonprofit-organizations-experience-growing-pains-just-like-people/>

There was stated concern that the group is emerging from the planning grant without a clear idea of how to redesign the current TARO website, which is what the participating institutions want the most. This may be simply a matter of timing. At the time of this survey, neither the Steering Committee nor the Subcommittees have seen all the final grant products from the NEH planning project. Some may not yet have the details of the requirements from the WebTex Subcommittee's final report on platforms evaluated. That report has formed the basis for a high-level requirements for TARO's website document created at the very end of June. Those high-level functional requirements are intended to support the group's pursuit of its website revision and its mission and vision for the benefit of its identified primary and secondary audiences.

The requirements, like the implementation plan, are written in two phases. The first phase includes the core functions needed for a new infrastructure to be viable. The second phase as we have noted in that document includes functionality that will require more time to develop and/or will involve more complex organizational and technical development.

The functional requirements document and a workplan for implementation were published on the project Wiki for the entire team in early July 2016. Also in July, the Project Manager and Consultant presented a high-level webinar overview to review and present all final products and documents, including this lessons learned document to the Steering Committee to hopefully increase transparency and understanding of the grant overall.

It was noted that having the Steering Committee co-chairs also chair subcommittees seems to be an unreasonable workload. In the future, spreading that work to other individuals would be a better distribution of responsibilities, since heading up a project like this one is a major time commitment.

Communication between subcommittees and the ability to understand how a subcommittee project fits into the bigger landscape was mentioned by at least one person. The Steering Committee might give some attention to horizontal lines of communication so that individuals can better understand how the pieces of the project fit together.

At least one person mentioned concerns about engagement by participating institutions beyond Steering Committee and subcommittee membership. For instance, not everyone who volunteered for platform testing fully followed through. This type of disconnect can be common on any project, but may be moderated through a combination of great clarity and persistence.

Summary

Overall, the feedback about the planning process of the project was very positive and indicated more strengths than weaknesses. The individuals involved in the Steering Committee, in particular, have learned a great deal about working with one another. They have worked productively, produced the needed tangible products, and communicated with one another and participants. They have earned the hearty congratulations of all concerned!

It appears that further communication with all parties on the long-term intent of the mid-project adjustment is an important element of shared understanding and engagement. The ability to see final grant products, which will include the specifications for the redesigned website and an implementation plan, should also allay some of those concerns. But, probably most difficult to communicate, all participants need to understand that without this type of work and clarity, an implementation project is neither fundable nor sustainable.

Recommendations to Consider Moving Forward

One area that was not surveyed but has since come out in further conversation with Steering Committee leadership is that the composition of the steering committee has, over time been very focused on the day-to day operations and work of the organization, and less on the long-term goal of financial sustainability. **Without shifting either the composition of the Steering Committee to include individuals who have more direct access to funding themselves, or direct contact and influence on resource allocators in their institutions, TARO will continue to struggle to sustain itself.**

Grant funds to implement new projects and to infuse the organization with energy and to upgrade technology and infrastructure is often necessary for a collaborative organization such as this, but for long-term maintenance and incremental upgrades, investment will need to be made and that will require the commitment on behalf of organizations and institutions within the region.

We would recommend TARO consider the creation of a task force or committee skilled in organizational development and sustainability. Members should be charged with focusing on financial sustainability issues, fundraising for special projects, and raising the visibility and profile of TARO in Texas and the region. This group should be recruited from those with a passion for Texas heritage and with strong ties to the philanthropic community, be resource allocators at their respective institutions, or able to help support TARO projects financially.

The Steering Committee can remain elected by member institutions and function as it does today, managing the business of the consortium until such time as there are paid staff members that may take on some of the duties of day-to-day operations.

Sub-Committees overseeing particular projects and tasks should continue to operate. **We would recommend that the Board, Steering and Sub-Committees should have written job descriptions with annual goals and objectives and that TARO design an annual evaluation process to establish an organization that is transparent, efficient and effective.**